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IGNORANCE VERSUS DEGRADATION? *THE PROFESSION OF GYPSY BEAR HANDLERS AND MANAGEMENT OF INCONVENIENT INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE. CASE STUDY – ROMANIA (I)*

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have been witnessing an increasing number of entries on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. With them, critical scientific trends describing its positive and negative effects began to emerge. In this article, I discuss the sense of such entries, showing their evaluative dimension as well as the difficulties of recognizing the areas of minority cultures as heritage – the areas which despite meeting all the entry criteria are in conflict with the modern ideas of European culture. I analyze these issues, using the Gypsy/Romani culture as an example – and more specifically the profession of bear handlers in Romania, which, due to its numerous similarities in history, training methods and folklore, I treat as representative of other European regions too. The text discusses the possible origins of this occupation, the place of the *Ursari* in the Romanian social structure together with their financial situation, and the attitude of the Church and State to bear handlers. It also presents the methods of animal training the Gypsies have used and passed on through the centuries, as well as the reasons why this profession has been disappearing in Romania. In the final (second) part of the article, I will discuss whether there is such a thing as the management of *Ursari* heritage (versus the management of inconvenient heritage), and if there is – what it entails.

The article uses qualitative research methods, including the analysis of historical sources (documents from the offices of Moldovan, Wallachian and Transylvanian rulers and descriptions written by people travelling across former Romanian territories dated 14th–19th centuries) and ethnographic sources. In addition, the analysis also focuses on visual sources from Romanian territories associated with the *Ursari* as well as on the sources used during my own pilot ethnographic study on the cultural memory among the Roma from Romania.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe, zarządzanie dziedzictwem, interpretacja dziedzictwa kulturowego, polifonia pamięci, Cyganie/Romowie, profesje cygańskie, *Ursari*, niedźwiedznicy, kultura rumuńska, folklor, tresura zwierząt

KEY WORDS: intangible cultural heritage, management of heritage, interpretation of cultural heritage, polyphony of memory, Gypsies/Roma, Gypsy professions (Gypsy occupations), *Ursari*, Gypsies with dancing bears, Romanian culture, folklore, animal training

1. Introduction

Gypsies¹ and cultural heritage? Gypsies and the UNESCO World Heritage List? Many Europeans may be surprised when reading these words. And yet, when thinking about cultural heritage, for which ‘special rankings’ have already been created, it is hard not to consider this issue in the context of national, ethnic and religious minorities living in Europe and all over the world. In order to survive, minorities, including the so-called stateless communities whose members are often spread all over the world, needed to create specific traditions representing their cultural identity against majority societies with which they co-existed. This identity, often based on the tradition passed down over the centuries and generations, does not always follow the historically changing trends seen in the majority culture. Moreover, it sometimes contradicts the newly-emerged ideas, generating conflicts and misunderstandings and frequently resulting in the annihilation of the centuries-old cultural heritage of the minority. Does the cultural heritage of these minorities – old, handed down from generation to generation, and incompatible with the modern trends and values of European culture – really deserve to be forgotten? What should be done with the cultural heritage which Europeans believe is inconvenient and sparks a lot of controversy and even opposition?

I assume that what is the key to asking these questions in the context of minority cultures are the missions and the related guidelines of international organizations striving to safeguard cultural heritage sites. I am particularly referring to UNESCO, which in 1972 adopted the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and in 2003 prepared a comprehensive convention for the safeguarding of the intangible heritage called *Living Human Treasures System*, which alluded to the project of protecting the activities of local communities in the field of traditional culture which has been implemented since the 1950s in Japan and other countries of the world². For the sake of this discussion, the second convention is particularly important, as it outlines which cultural phenomena can be considered historical sites and which criteria they have to meet. The relevant categories include traditions, oral traditions, customs, rites and rituals associated with the holidays typical of a particular culture or several cultures, language, events, knowledge about the universe and nature and the related ritual practices, as well as skills related to traditional craftsmanship. In order for them to be included on the UNESCO list, these sites have to be transmitted mostly orally from generation to generation, and their presence has to strengthen the local community’s sense of identity and guarantee their sustainable growth³.

¹ A fragment of a larger whole. Although the contemporary social and scientific trends should link the term ‘Gypsies’ with the history of this ethnic group and the term ‘Roma’ – with their present day situation, in this article I use the two names interchangeably.

² *Guidelines for the Establishment of National “Living Human Treasures” Systems*, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf> [access: 3.08.2015].

³ *Dziedzictwo niematerialne*, <http://www.unesco.pl/kultura/dziedzictwo-kulturowe/dziedzictwo-niematerialne/> [access: 2.08.2015].

One can say that from the mid-20th century there were no problems with the efforts of individual countries of the world aimed at preserving traditions. However, with the adoption of the global UNESCO Convention, which has equipped the heritage with the right to pass top-down value judgments, "*alea iacta est*" (the die is cast). A large group of experts in each country began combing the intangible culture, picking out – by (often) arbitrary decisions – resources that could be entered on the List. In 2003, first entries on the intangible heritage list were made⁴. Today, it is already clear that the consequences of the growing list of UNESCO "masterpieces" can be measured in two ways – as positive and negative. The positive consequences include: people caring more for the sites, increased chances that the sites will survive, potential for a greater consolidation of the local community, a reason to be proud and grow stronger, and a reason to build a new identity with the piece of tangible or intangible culture as its symbol. Moreover, the spot on the UNESCO list is often linked with more funding for revitalization⁵ and even research. However, experience with entries on the UNESCO list also unveils its negative repercussions, as increasingly mentioned in critical studies on cultural heritage. These include e.g. the excessive commercialization of local and global culture stemming from the intensified mass tourism (e.g. the manufacturing of traditional products and performing traditional rites before mass audience), the ludic being superior to the realm of magic and rituals, the disappearance of oral traditions in the local community, and the "taking over" of a specific piece of heritage by "local mafias", which do not understand the associated magical and ritual background and only "do the show". Furthermore, a kind of folk wisdom has begun to spread – the more entries a culture has, the better and richer it is. It also seems that UNESCO lists only reinforce the 19th-century evolutionary division of cultures into high and low and the associated ignorance of cultural differences. Due to the said division, certain rites, rituals, beliefs and professions which go beyond today's generally accepted European cultural notions have no chance of being entered on the UNESCO list. To my mind, the whole absurdity of UNESCO list entries is revealed first and foremost in minority cultures, whose traditions are inevitably often dramatically different than European culture. The cultural differences in ways of thinking and rituals are frequently so distinct that Europeans find it hard to accept them at all, let alone enter them on the list of cultural heritage sites. The analysis of the management existing UNESCO entries is very clear – in the case of minority cultures, they primarily include the so-called safe elements, e.g. carnivals, music, singing, or dancing. But what about the heritage that is less „convenient"? What about the ancient rituals of different cultures in which animal or human blood is shed (the ritual of laying a sacrifice in the foundations of a house, adding menstrual blood to magical food, brotherhood of blood) or a human body is mutilated

⁴ *Listy Dziedzictwa Niematerialnego*, <http://www.unesco.pl/kultura/dziedzictwo-kulturowe/dziedzictwo-niematerialne/listy-dziedzictwa-niematerialnego/> [access: 3.08.2015].

⁵ I am using the term revitalization not only in relation to the renovation of tangible cultural objects, but also to the practice of saving from oblivion or raising the awareness of such intangible heritages as traditional knowledge, rites, rituals, and professions.

(the Day of Ashura or initiation rites)? Will we start to deem them valuable only after they have vanished, as believed by certain researchers, or only after they have been recognized by someone or something more powerful (a ministry, a museum, or scientists)?⁶ Is there even a chance that such “inconvenient” cases will be one of the priorities of cultural heritage management?

The above-described situation applies to numerous cultures, including the Gypsy/Romani culture, which in modern times has become the subject of a number of EU projects and socio-political debates. Its tradition, which goes many centuries back, differs in many aspects from the contemporary tenets of European culture, e.g. on the issue of traditional marriages, their own trials, the attitudes men have towards women, as well as education, ecology, and traditional professions. With the generally negative stereotype associated with this minority in Europe, only a small handful of researchers and enthusiasts of this culture sees that – as any other culture – the Romani culture too has areas which deserve protection. What is more, according to the UNESCO guidelines, these areas require **special protection**, as they are part of tangible and/or intangible cultural heritage⁷. However, in the case of the Roma people, the issue of heritage is extremely problematic if not inconvenient, as Europe perceives this ethnos from the perspective of integration whose implied meaning is assimilation with majority groups. Due to their own unwritten code (e.g. *mageripen*, *rromanipen*), which on certain issues stands in contradiction to the European law and morality⁸, Gypsies are “troublesome”, especially for those who wish to impose one universally valid pattern of behavior on all via EU decrees and regulations. Therefore, considerable EU financial outlays and projects are employed to solve the Roma issue. They are aimed mainly at creating equal opportunities and including Roma in the majority societies, at the same time declaring the possibility of them retaining the traditions which do not conflict with European customs, especially the new ones. Meanwhile, parts of the Gypsy traditions inherently collide and will for some time continue to collide with the new European law and the new top-down customs. Despite the political and economic changes forcing Roma to abandon their traditions, some of them are still practiced, while other traditions are becoming extinct before our very eyes. Increasingly, as a result of EU regulations and directives, Gypsies are forced via negotiations and appropriate financial solutions to give up their customs. This proves that in Europe there is no such thing as the concept of global, strategic management of the Romani heritage, and in a broader sense – of inconvenient heritage.

In this article, I would like to take a closer look at the Gypsy/Romani culture and deliberate whether it has any areas that comply with the guidelines for entry on

⁶ L. Nikočević, *Culture or heritage? The problem of Intangibility*, https://www.academia.edu/16807730/Culture_or_Heritage_The_Problem_of_Intangibility [access: 13.09.2015].

⁷ More on this topic: L. Mróz, *Ochrona niematerialnego dziedzictwa kultury Romów. Przypadek szczególny* [in:] K. Braun (Ed.), *Niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe. Identyfikacja – dokumentacja – ochrona. Interpretacja – pojęcia – poglądy*, Warszawa–Węgorzewo 2013, p. 231–253.

⁸ M. Courthiade, *O romskim sądzie obyczajowym*, “*Studia Romologica*” 2008, I, p. 13–29; J. Ficowski, *Cyganie w Polsce*, Warszawa 1989, p. 59–73.

the UNESCO list and therefore deserve particular protection. As the object of my analysis, I choose the now disappearing Gypsy professions, more specifically and in the context of the cultural heritage – the last European bear handlers, i.e. Gypsies who train various animals, but above all, as the name suggests, bears. I will illustrate the issue of Gypsy bear handlers, using Romania as an example, since for 20 years I have been conducting anthropological field research on traditional beliefs, rites, and rituals there, during which I have had a chance to meet many representatives of the Romani culture and to listen to their stories about the world. It can be assumed that the case of Romanian bear handlers is representative for other regions and perfectly illustrates changes associated with this occupational group of Gypsies from different countries as well as changes in the culture of Europeans, which has travelled the way from the world of the sacred, performance, and grotesque to the world of the profane and the decrees which selectively protect only part of the heritage while dooming other heritages to obsolescence. I will scrutinize this problem by showing both positive and negative aspects of the history of bear handlers living on the Romanian territories, their animal training methods, as well as their role and function in folklore. I am well aware of the accompanying difficulty, because the Gypsy culture has never been a literate culture and has been marked by a high degree of oral traditions, which has left a small number of written sources from the past centuries. Therefore, I will reconstruct it from the fragments of historical and ethnographic records, while keeping in mind that the researcher presents a highly subjective description of the cultural reality he is studying. However, this process is common during the reconstruction of every folk rite or custom (of the intangible cultural heritage) whose feature is orality and no written records. I assume that this way of presenting the problem will most accurately unveil the lack of innocence in the entries on the UNESCO list of cultural heritage. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the said profession is not only characteristic of Romania, as in the mid-20th century it was possible to come across the *Ursari* with live bears in nearly every part of Europe⁹; today, they are only to be seen in countries not associated with the European Union (e.g. Albania and Serbia) or – very rarely – in the ones that have recently acceded to the EU (e.g. Bulgaria and Romania). Not so long ago – in 2012 – trained bears could be seen walking the streets of Thessaloniki in Greece¹⁰, dancing on the streets of towns and cities in southern Romania, per-

⁹ To read more on Gypsy bear handlers, see e.g.: L. Mróz, *Dzieje Cyganów–Romów w Rzeczypospolitej XV–XVIII w.*, Warszawa 2001, p. 270–272; E. Mariușakova, *Bear-Trainers in Bulgaria (Traditions and contemporary situation)*, “Ethnologia Bulgarica” 1998, vol. 1, p. 106–116; Г. Михайлова, *Маскирани ли са маскираните персонажи в Българската народна традиция*, МОНОГРАФИИ 1, София 2001, p. 12–28; P. Tünaydin, *Pawing through the History of Bear dancing in Europe*, https://www.academia.edu/3234118/Pawing_through_the_History_of_Bear_dancing_in_Europe [access: 12.12.2014]; M. Isztok, *Śladami historii – Romowie Niedźwiednicy*, <http://sen-meritum.home.pl/romagazinePL/?p=42> [access: 5.12.2014].

¹⁰ *Poslednji medvedi u zatočeništvu*, <http://www.b92.net/tv/najava.php?id=840> [access: 1.12.2015].

forming in the backyards of Bulgarian and Serbian towns¹¹, and travelling by bus in Bulgaria and Albania¹². The fact that today they are apprehensively hidden in several European cities makes it all the more urgent to think about the sense of UNESCO list entries or even EU regulations and the initiatives of selected NGOs. Delving into this issue is particularly important to me, because it unmasks a certain kind of colonialism still persisting in the European mind-set, disclosing not only what we already know in the context of safeguarding the cultural heritage – that it can be arbitrary and implemented by a more powerful player – but also what we are only beginning to realize – that beyond “our protection”, there may be a realm of “our oblivion” which may include “alien” tangible and intangible objects about which we do not care, which do not matter to us and which we do not want to pass on to our heirs. It may be a space of all forms of “our” degradation and marginalization of “alien legacy,” a space where we often let this legacy to become forgotten¹³.



III. 1. The Ursari in Sinaia, 1920, postcard published in Bucharest, source: <http://www.delcampe.net/page/item/id,193990407>, var, SINAIA-1920-Tigani-URSARI-Tziganes-Gypsies-with-Bears-unused-rare-postcard,language,E.html

¹¹ *Der letzte Tanz – Die Befreiung der bulgarischen Tanzbären Goscho und Bobby*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmcCmJOZ4jA> [access: 1.12.2015]; *Serbische Tanzbären warten immer noch auf Rettung*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVtkV3bZN2I> [access: 1.12.2015].

¹² W. Szablowski, *Tańczące niedźwiedzie*, Warszawa 2014.

¹³ The UNESCO cultural heritage itself inspires a lot of questions about its purpose, essence, discourses, and the areas remaining outside it. Looking at the UNESCO list, we can discover sites which are the most valuable for a given nation, but we also see that many areas have been excluded and are still beyond the officially recognized legacy. See: E. Kocój, *Dziedzictwo bez dziedziców? Religijne i materialne dziedzictwo kulturowe mniejszości pochodzenia wołoskiego w kontekście projektu interdyscyplinarnych badań*, “Zarządzanie w Kulturze” 2015, vol. 2, p. 137–150.

2. The *Ursari* in Romanian history – case study

2.1. “Slavery and freedom”

The beginnings of bear taming on the Romanian land are still unclear to researchers due to the lack of available written sources. Despite the fact that Gypsies arrived to Wallachia¹⁴ in the second half of the 14th century, we still do not know if they were back then already divided into different tribes and what professions they practiced. It is also unknown whether the *Ursari* were a separate occupational Gypsy group from the outset, or whether they emerged and evolved from the Roma ethnos which arrived there much earlier (14th century) or from the groups of Gypsy animal trainers which sporadically came there from other regions. The first historical sources proving their presence in the Romanian territories probably come from the areas of Moldavia and were drawn up by travelers journeying across Eastern Europe¹⁵. These references, however, are quite rare, and are usually limited to providing the information that certain Moldavian areas were home to the settlement of the greatest number of *Ursari* families established according to the will of hospodars.¹⁶ One of the oldest information about the *Lăutari*, Gypsy musicians offered as a gift to the Moldavian Vornic Dingă¹⁷ by the Wallachian Voivode Mircea the Shepherd (†1599), dates back to 1558 and comes from the areas of Wallachia. It is unknown whether there were any bear handlers among them, but some Romanian researchers claim that the *Lăutari* and the *Ursari* staying together was a rule in these territories. There is evidence of the presence of the Gypsy *Ursari* in Wallachia in the 18th century. We possess information dating back to 1775 about the *Lăutari* guild (*breaslă*) established in this re-

¹⁴ V. Achim, *Țigani în istoria României*, București 1998; E. Kocój, P. Lechowski, *Cyganie w Rumunii (z dziejów tematu w wiekach XV–XIX)* [in:] St. Jakimowska, E. Wieruszewska (Eds.), *We wspólnocie narodów i kultur. W kręgu relacji polsko-rumuńskich. Materiały z sympozjum*, Suczawa 2008, p. 374–387.

¹⁵ *Relația lui Gosciecki* [in:] P. Panaitescu (Ed.), *Călători poloni în Țările Române*, București 1930, p. 136; *Solia lui Iosif Podoski. Diariusz poselstwa Podoskiego do Turcji* [in:] *Călători poloni în...*, p. 204. From the 17th century onwards, there appeared an increasing number of historical sources from the hospodars' office concerning the presence of Gypsy animal trainers in the areas of Moldova. Even in the first half of the 20th century, the historian Gheorghe G. Bezviconi, when travelling across the Romanian lands, reported that many Gypsy masters of acrobatics and animal training resided precisely in this very Principality.

¹⁶ G.G. Bezviconi, *Călători ruși în Moldova și Muntenia*, București 1947, p. 215. Even now in Moldova, bear handlers are concentrated in the vicinity of such regions as Bacioi (village of Corbasca), Pădureni (village of Berești), Bistrita, Basca (village of Berzunți), Rădoaia (village of Parava), Temelia (village of Gura Văii), Valea Seacă (village of Livezi), Serbești (village of Saucеști), Doftana, Asau, Podu Turcului, and Pancești. Moreover, large groups of bear handlers lived in such cities as Buhuși, Bacău, Târgu Ocna, Dărmănești, Moinești, Onești, and Comănești; see: *Tradiții ale rromilor din spațiul românesc*, ed. G. Aleksandrescu, București 2004, http://academos.ro/sites/default/files/biblio-docs/269/traditii_ale_rromilor_din_spatiul_romanesc.pdf [access: 28.12.2015].

¹⁷ *Lăutarii – “gentilomi de mahala”*, <http://horiamuntenus.blogspot.com/2010/02/nicolae-filimon-ii-numeste-gentilomi-de.html> [access: 7.12.2015].

gion. Its members specialized in playing various instruments, fortune-telling, magic, and bear training. Their performances as well as over 48-hour-long accompaniments and shows delivered at peasant wedding receptions were frequently rounded off with drunken brawls¹⁸.

Out of the three categories of Gypsy slaves who in the 14th–19th centuries were owned by hospodars, monasteries and boyars, the *Ursari* initially belonged to the first one (the so-called lord's Gypsies). They shared the group together with other Gypsy representatives, including goldsmiths, blacksmiths, Rudars, and wood smiths. However, because the *Ursari* used to be donated by hospodars as gifts, they often became the property of the Orthodox monasteries or boyars, thus passing to a different category of slaves (the so-called monastery or boyar slaves).



III. 2. Dance with a bear, source: <http://www.gandul.info/stiri/puterea-ursului-937771>

The majority of researchers consider the Gypsy bear handlers to be a nomadic community. However, it seems that this wording needs to be made more precise, because this specific group of Gypsies in Romania was clearly divided into two parts – one was settled, resided in their owner's estates, and was not involved in any seasonal migration; the other one was semi-settled and migrated during certain months of the year. The settled *Ursari* were mainly responsible for welcoming and entertaining guests. This specific role of bear tamers was described by the Polish Jesuit, priest, and explorer Franciszek Gościcki (*1668†1729) during his journey with a diplomatic mission through Moldavia to Istanbul. He wrote that their duties included welcoming guests who were arriving at their owner's court as well as entertaining them with music and circus-like performances¹⁹. They lived next to hospodars' and boyars' manors or close to monasteries and the settlements of lesser gentry. For this reason, they are

¹⁸ *O istorie lăutarilor*, <http://www.scripgroup.com/diverse/muzica/O-istorie-a-lautarilor82969.php> [access: 1.12.2015].

¹⁹ *Călători poloni în...*, București 1930, p. 136, 204.

often counted by Romanian researchers among *vătrăși* – a different category (group) of Gypsies, based on the criterion of mobility. They are non-nomadic, settled Roma who live around the family hearth (Rom. *vatra* – hearth)²⁰. Despite officially being slaves, the second group of *Ursari* enjoyed relative freedom of moving throughout the country; however, they were obliged to regularly arrive at their owner's court and pay him a set amount of money. As already mentioned, during the months of spring, summer, and autumn, the group wandered around the Romanian Principalities with their bears, which danced and performed circus tricks to the great amusement of the spectators. They visited fairs and markets in villages, small towns, and big cities²¹. During the migrating season, they used to live in tents, hence their other name – *șat-rari*, from the Romanian *șatră* meaning *tent*²². As early as then, the transfer of the bear handling tradition must have been done orally and from generation to generation. It is also likely that the Romanian lands were reached by the *Ursari* from the contemporary Polish territories, with the famous 17th-century Bear Academy of Smorgon – the school of bear training, which mainly employed Roma and was financed by the Polish magnates of the Radziwiłł family²³. What also proves that the custom of this particular profession was transmitted orally over the generations is the fact that bear handlers used to travel with their entire families, and their children, who very often performed with adults, were accustomed to the presence of animals and taught how to train them from birth. Probably not many Gypsy individuals from this group were granted personal freedom (or at least could make others think they were free), which was pointed out by many foreign travelers, including French professor F.C. Launcon, who wrote about them in 1822. In his opinion, Gypsy fortune-tellers and *Ursari* were the most bizarre of all free Gypsies – they taught bears how to dance to the accompaniment of a violin or tambourine²⁴. The *Ursari* roamed the areas of Romanian Principalities accompanied by their animals, but they often crossed the contem-

²⁰ A. Năstase, *Rromi ursari. Prezentarea generală a ramuri de rromi ursari*, [in:] G. Aleksandrescu (Ed.), *Tradiții ale rromilor din spațiul românesc*, București 2004, p. 5, http://academos.ro/sites/default/files/biblio-docs/269/traditii_ale_rromilor_din_spatiul_romanesc.pdf [access: 28.12.2015]; <http://biblioteca.regielive.ro/proiecte/sociologie/ritualul-nuntii-la-rromii-ursari-si-caldarari-23032.html> [access: 28.12.2015].

²¹ V. Achim, *Țigani în istoria României*, București 1998, p. 23; E. Kocój, P. Lechowski, *Cyganie w Rumunii (z dziejów tematu w wiekach XIV–XIX)*, Suceava 2006, p. 374–387; *Călători Străini despre Țările Române*, p. 213–214; Ch. Todaro, *Who are the Roma/Gypsies of Romania. The Four Necessary Steps in Understanding. The Case System of Romanian Roma*, <http://tzigania.com/Caste-System.html> [access: 4.12.2015].

²² D. Grigore, *Curs de antropologie si folclor rrom / Introducere in studiul elementelor de cultura traditionala ale identitatii rrome contemporane*, București 2001, <http://www.ase.ro/upcpr/profesorii/367/Curs%20de%20antropologie%20si%20folclor%20rrom%20-%20Introducere%20in%20studiul%20elementelor%20de%20cultura%20traditionala%20ale%20identitatii%20rrome%20contemporane.txt> [access: 8.12.2015]; *Șatră*, <http://dexonline.ro/definitie/%C8%98atr%C4%83> [access: 8.12.2012].

²³ Isztok M., *Śladami historii – Romowie Niedźwiedznicy*, <http://sen-meritum.home.pl/romazinePL/?p=42> [access: 5.12.2015].

²⁴ P. Cernovodeanu, *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, Vol. 2: 1822–1830, București 2005, p. 33.

porary borders. Just like Bulgarian animal trainers, bear handlers from Romania also took their performances as far northeast as Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg), as far southwest as Serbia, or even Turkey in the southeast²⁵. It is not known how large this group was; however, according to the Russian traveler Ignati Iakovenko (*?†1870), who was a frequent visitor to the Romanian lands, in the early 19th century the *Ursari* were the largest professional group among the lord's Gypsies in Wallachia – they owned approximately 1,000 huts (for comparison: the spoon makers owned 800 huts, while the goldsmiths and the blacksmiths only 700 each)²⁶. Although these figures do not mean much to us now, as the number of people a Gypsy hut could shelter varied from several to several dozen, they do reveal some crucial information about the advantage this group had over other Gypsy occupational groups inhabiting the areas of Romania.

In the second half of the 19th century, after Gypsies had been granted freedom, part of Gypsies belonging to the said group started to move from Romania to the Balkan Peninsula and settle in Serbia, where they have been known as *Mečkari* (from the Serbian *мечка* meaning *bear*), as well as in Bosnia and northern Bulgaria. Svetlana Ćirković observed that bear handlers were one of the most mobile Gypsy groups in those days. After arriving in the Balkans at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, some of them continued their journey directly from Romania or the Balkans further to the regions of Western Europe such as Germany, France, and Belgium. Some reached the lands as faraway as the countries of North America²⁷. Many iconographic sources illustrating this Gypsy occupation practiced in Romania and other parts of Europe, including paintings by artists, press photography, and postcards, date back to these very times²⁸.

The financial situation of bear handlers varied. Those living on their owners' estates supported themselves from the handouts received from their lord or the prior of the monastery. The wandering *Ursari* were remunerated by the audience admiring their performances. People were willing to give Gypsies charity money, as the religious world of contemporary Europe did not mind poverty and vagrancy, and supporting the less fortunate was yet another way to redeem sins and earn salvation.

²⁵ E. Mariușiakova, *Bear-Trainers in Bulgaria (Traditions and contemporary situation)*, "Ethnologia Bulgarica" 1998, Vol. 1, p. 106–116.

²⁶ I. Iakovenko, *Situația actuală a principatelor Moldova și Țara Românească. Scrisoarea a 12, București, 5 iulie, 1820* [in:] *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, Vol. 1: 1801–1821, G. Filitti (Ed.), București 2004, p. 865.

²⁷ E. Mariușiakova, V. Popov, *Bear-trainers in Bulgaria (tradition and contemporary situation)*, "Ethnologia Bulgarica" 1998, Vol. 1, p. 106–116; S. Ćirković, *Ursarii. O poveste biografică*, "Piramida" 2011, No. 2, p. 104, http://www.academia.edu/1135782/Ursarii._O_Poveste_Biografic_ [access: 2.02.2015]; A. Sorescu-Marinković, *Imagining the Past, Creating Identity: the Case of the Bayash*, <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0350-0861/2011/0350-08611102047S.pdf> [access: 28.12.2015].

²⁸ E. Kocój, P. Lechowski, K. Plebańczyk, *Tematyka cygańska w polskich zbiorach ikonograficznych (XIX w.–I połowa XX w.) – rekonesans*, "Zarządzanie w Kulturze", ZN UJ, Kraków 2012, No. 13, Vol. 3, p. 171–183; *The image of Gypsies in Polish iconographic collections (the 19th century – the first half of the 20th century)*, "ProMemoria. Revista Institutului de Istorie Socială" 2012, Vol. II, No. 3, p. 74–88.

Donations to beggars were in a way a religious duty of every believer (whether he was Jewish, Christian, or Muslim). Thus, sometimes when they performed in an area replete with people willing to generously support them or around the festive time of the Liturgical or ritual calendar, like during annual feast days (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Dormition of the Mother of God) or at weddings and fairs, bear handlers earned quite decent profits. What is more, they were obliged to pay an obligatory annual fee to their owners. Some Gypsy *Ursari*, however, were quite wealthy – they were able to fund or renovate a church, investing so much money that their portraits were placed on the outer walls of Orthodox churches, imitating the frescoes presenting the sponsoring rulers. Such frescoes portraying the *Ursari* with their bears can be primarily found in southern Romania, with the majority dating back to the 19th century. These are e.g. frescoes in the Orthodox churches of Covrești de Jos (1802), Covrești de Sus (1826) or Olari near Hurez (1826)²⁹.



III. 3. Gipsy bears trainers from Romania, the end of 20th century, photo: Paweł Lechowski

The profession of bear handlers, particularly the itinerant ones, was not always accepted by high-ranking authorities. It is known that both *Lăutari* and *Ursari* were criticized by the Orthodox Church, whose dignitaries warned believers throughout the centuries against any contacts with wandering musicians and animal trainers playing and performing at weddings and fairs, threatening them with divine retribution. Such rules were also found in the written laws of Romanian hospodars, e.g. in 1652 in Matei Besarab's (*1588†1664) sets of laws and rules of conduct called *Pravilas*, which banned the marriages of young girls with the roving musicians:

²⁹ Field research, Romania 2014. See also: C. Bobulescu, *Lăutari și hori în pictura bisericilor noastre*, București 1940, p. 67, 77–78; L. Zamora, C.G. Duma, *Zid. Cătorii mărunte din nordul Olteniei*, București 2013, p. 93.



III. 4. Romanian bears trainers, the first half of 20th century, collection: Andrzej Grzymała-Kazłowski

“No musician who plays the violin and wanders around fairs, squares, and weddings can marry a daughter of a good man or boyar, as some of them are condemned by our Lord and people” (Rom. *Nici alătutariul carele zice cu vioare și alăute pre le târguri și pre la sbouri și pre la nunte, nu poate să ia fata de om bun său de boiaru, ca unii că aceia sînt botjocură de Dumnezeu și oamenilor*)³⁰.

Similar prohibitions emerged in the 18th century – in 1793 in Jassy, Mihai Suțu issued a *hrisov* on the Gypsy bear handlers, in which he banned bear performances, dressing up in costumes, and street performances³¹. These bans, however, were no threat to the popularity of bear handlers, as the society related more to the world of entertainment and grotesque than to the world of transcendence and the associated moral code. *Homo ludens* preferred this type of celebration to the activities of *homo religious*, because the latter had to participate in Orthodox rituals based on unclear theology, lengthy church services, and passionate prayers.

Sadly, the “ferocious” performances given by the *Ursari* and the related world of entertainment began to shrink slowly but steadily as a result of a series of laws gradually introduced by the Romanian government since the early 20th century. The 1908 Regulation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs prohibited the breeding of bears by private owners and performances with bears, based on the rationale that “Gypsies walking with bears around towns give the wildest performances”³². However, despite such official constraints, Gypsies continued to roam with their bears, and the audience eagerly

³⁰ C. Bobulescu, *Lăutari și hori în pictura bisericilor noastre*, București 1940, p. 19, 67, 77–78; <http://pl.scribd.com/doc/77046610/Indreptarea-Legii-Pravila-cea-Mare-1652> [4.10.2015].

³¹ M.C. Suțu, *Hrisov domnesc de așezământ*, Iași 1793. http://digitool.dc.bmms.ro:8881/R/4B7RKBPIYAI32441B5MCXNJN6B9VAMLANFTSGTN7APTC41F5Q-04000?func=results-jump-full&set_entry=000006&set_number=003521&base=GEN01 [access: 15.10.2015].

³² See: <http://www.edrc.ro/docs/docs/tigani/012-015.pdf> [access: 5.12.2015]; *Calendarul Romilor*, <http://www.asociatiaproroma.ro/site/index.php/domeniu/cultura/calendar> [access: 5.12.2015].

attended their performances, which only meant that the law resonated with the Romanian society quite poorly. As a result, at the beginning of 1924 the approach to bear handlers in Romania was toughened, and from 1928 onwards relevant authorities had the right to arrest Gypsies travelling with bears. Many *Ursari* abandoned animal handling and limited their performances to music, joining different *Lăutari* groups, while others started to earn their living like the remaining Gypsy groups, becoming e.g. comb makers (Rom. *pieptănari*), who crafted small items from animal bones; spoon makers (Rom. *lingurari*), who made wooden household utensils such as spoons, forks, knives, plates, bowls, and mats; or aluminum dish casters (Rom. *ceaunari*)³³.



III. 5. Gipsy trainers of bears, fresco (wall painting), Orthodox church in Covrești, Romania, 19th century, photo: Marian Hanik

The traces of bear handling and the slave structure within which bear handlers functioned were visible in Romania for a long time despite all the legal and administrative endeavors to eliminate them. Even in the second half of the 20th century, some monasteries in the Romanian territories still kept bears in captivity on their estates, often in very poor conditions. Moreover, some restaurants in Romania offered the performances of dancing bears to tourists nearly to the beginning of the 21st century, e.g. in the city of Bran³⁴. In 2005, with the help of non-governmental organizations, the first bear reserve was established in Romania. It is called *LiBearty* and is located in Zarnești near Brașov. It has become shelter for many

³³ *Obiceiuri traditionale "rromi ursari"*, <http://popoloromani.blogspot.com/2012/03/obiceiuri-traditionale.html> [access: 2.10.2015]; *The End of the Dancing Bears*, <http://horinca.blogspot.com/2007/09/end-of-dancing-bears.html> [access: 2.10.2015].

³⁴ *Despre noi. Rezervația de urși. Câteva cuvinte despre LiBearty*, <http://www.ampbears.ro/ro/sanctuar-ursi> [access: 8.12.2015].

animals from circuses, restaurants, and monasteries, and nowadays – although it happens very rarely – animals seized from Gypsies who prepare them for dancing shows are transported there³⁵.

2.2. Gypsy animal training

In their profession, the *Ursari* used young animals mainly bought from lumberjacks or captured in the woods by Gypsies themselves. Although in the 16th to the 18th centuries, it was mostly peasants from Wallachia who specialized in hunting wild animals, gradually it became an activity practiced by peasants from all over Romania³⁶. The British traveler and diplomat Laurence Oliphant (*1829†1888), who journeyed across the Romanian lands in the 1850s and 1860s, pointed out that it was Gypsies who immediately took the wild bears and wolves captured by lumberjacks and peasants in order to use them later in their grotesque performances³⁷. This practice was quite common in Romania until the mid-20th century, with isolated cases still occurring even today; Gypsies and Romanians living in villages still occasionally buy wild animals (usually wolves and bears) from lumberjacks, tame them, and keep them in their homes³⁸. It sometimes happens that such animals are taught to perform and then sold abroad.

The moment a bear cub was bought by a Gypsy, it became a member of his family. It lived under one roof with its owner and was raised almost like a child or even in the same way. It was also given a female or male name, depending on its sex. In Romania, male bears were usually named Martin (Rom. *Martin*) or Nicholas (Rom. *Nicolae*)³⁹. As a result, the relationship between Gypsies and their animals was exceptional – they were a symbolic unity, and probably neither party could imagine being separated. Later on, when the bear became more sizeable and its smell became hard to bear, it lived in a special space outside the dwelling area. At this point, it was frequently chained to trees or poles near the house. It was sometimes placed in special cages so that they could not escape. From its early years, the bear was accustomed to other animals living with the handler's family and in the camp. When the bear was about 3 to 10 months old, the handler pierced its nose and pulled a metal needle through it, attaching a thick rope or chain, which accompanied the animal till

³⁵ Information obtained from the employees of the Bear Reserve in Zarnești, Romania – April 2013.

³⁶ G. Potra, *Contribuții la istoricul ȝiganilor din Romania*, București 1939, p. 35.

³⁷ L. Oliphant, *Țărmurile rusești ale Mării Negre în toamna anului 1852 călătoria pe Volga și turul prin țara cazacilor de pe Don* [in:] *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, Serie nouă, Vol. VI: 1852–1856, D. Bușă, C. Achim, C. Ardeleanu et al. (Eds.), București 2010, p. 42.

³⁸ Field research; information obtained in 2010 from a Maramureș resident who bought two wolves and two boars from lumberjacks. He domesticated the animals and raised them at home with his family.

³⁹ E. Niculița-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român adunate și așezate în ordine mitologică*, Vol. II, Iași 1998, p. 316.

the end of its days⁴⁰. This allowed the bear handler to control the bear's movements by causing it pain. Some bears had their eyes burnt out or poked out in order to make them unable to see their surroundings and thus more docile⁴¹. Moreover, bears were castrated, as it was believed that this procedure would reduce their aggression and excitability, eliminating the risk of them attacking the audience. The bear's canines were also extracted. All these operations were performed without any anesthesia and – which was a standard practice in those conditions – with unsterilized tools. This led to a number of infections, which were treated with home-made remedies but most often left untreated. As a consequence, the bear's nostrils frequently oozed puss (sometimes throughout its entire life) and were a hotbed of bacteria or even vermin. Due to the lack of proper food, which impoverished Gypsies were not able to provide, bears often suffered from tuberculosis, blindness, or leptospirosis. By coming into contact with other sick animals, they frequently contracted rabies⁴². In training, bear handlers needed to observe two principles – no feeding meat to bears (so that they do not become aggressive) and no excessive feeding (so that they do not dominate over their owners): “In order to seize the bear, Gypsies got it drunk on Rakia, then burnt its eyes out so that it could not see, and put a ring attached to a chain into its nose. The bear was given very little food to prevent it from growing too strong and killing its master. A Gypsy taught the animal how to dance by beating out the rhythm (time) on a drum (or sieve – *ciurul* in Romanian). He earned his living by making his bear dance while traversing villages and towns”⁴³.

From a young age, the bear was taught circus tricks as well as a specific dance referred to in Romania as *tanana*, with other variants called *tananaoa* or *tânânâ* (in Romani – *tanana*, in different dialects meaning *to shake something (out)*)⁴⁴. In this context it meant a dance combined with begging for money. The name was transferred to bear dancing from a specific type of dance sometimes called the Gypsy *hora* (Rom. *hora țiganeasca*), which used to be performed by Gypsy boys and girls to a special melody named *tananica*. During the *hora*, dancers moved their legs in a fast and distinctive manner and jumped, while at the same time holding out their

⁴⁰ Similar practices were common among the peoples of Kaladar in India and Pakistan, who by some researchers are regarded as the counterparts of Gypsies. See: B.A. Brower, B.R. Johnston, *Disappearing Peoples?: indigenous groups and ethnic minorities in South and Central Asia*, Walnut Creek 2007, p. 66–67; I. Hancock, *The East European Roots of Romani Nationalism. The Gypsies in Eastern Europa*, “Nationalities Papers”, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Winter, 1991, p. 251–268; *Qalandar – History and Cultural Relations*, <http://www.everyculture.com/South-Asia/Qalandar-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html> [access: 26.02.2015].

⁴¹ M. Kogălniceanu, *Skizze einer Geschichte der Zigeuner; ihrer Sitten und ihrer Sprache, nebst einem kleinen Wörterbuche dieser Sprache*, Stuttgart 1840, p. 18–19.

⁴² *The End of the Dancing Bears*, <http://horinca.blogspot.com/2007/09/end-of-dancing-bears.html> [access: 1.10. 2015].

⁴³ E. Niculița-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român adunate și așezate în ordine mitologică*, Vol. II, p. 316.

⁴⁴ I obtained this information from prof. Marcel Courthiade, to whom I would like to express my sincere gratitude.

hands for money⁴⁵. The dance derives from the times of slavery, when Gypsies used to dance before boyars or on the sides of roads, asking for mercy and alms⁴⁶. When performed by a bear, *hora tiganeasca* simply meant alternating movements of its forelegs and rear legs to the accompaniment of sounds played on crude musical instruments.

There were all sorts of methods to train a bear. A young bear was usually placed on hot embers, a warm metal sheet, or a hot stove, where a piece of bread or salt was waiting as a reward. While playing instruments and singing *tananaoa*, Gypsies taught the animal to lift its legs in an alternate manner: first forelegs and then rear legs or alternately the right foreleg with the left rear leg and then the left foreleg with the right rear leg. During the dance, Gypsies were chanting the following words: my Martin, dance well at our will, for they will give you bread with oil (Rom. *joacă bine măi Marine, că-ți dau pâine cu măsline*)⁴⁷. One of the “teaching aids” was a whip, and if the animal performed the routine properly, it was rewarded with the previously prepared food. After repeated lessons, the bear began to lift its legs by itself as soon as it heard the familiar melody⁴⁸. All of it resembled a dance, thus it is commonly believed that bears dance to the Gypsy music. In their descriptions of bear trainings, some travelers reported to have seen Gypsies place a pot of honey mixed with Rakia somewhere to lure a bear, often with its entire family – a she-bear and cubs. The strong alcohol allegedly made the animals jump and dance frantically along to the music⁴⁹.

As already mentioned, in order to teach bears how to dance as well as during their performances, Gypsies used musical instruments. The most common one was certainly a tambourine (Rom. *tamburină* or *daira*, *dairea*; Turk. *daïre*), with a piece of bread on top used to lead the bear to the rhythm played on the instrument and to special dance routines. Moreover, Gypsies used many other instruments during trainings and shows, including clarinets, violins, and gadulkas⁵⁰. In Romania, bear handlers also used bagpipes (Rom. *cimpói*), kobzas (Rom. *țevă*), and pan flutes (Rom. *nai*)⁵¹.

After the training was completed, Gypsies started their bear performances, travelling with the animal all over the country from early spring to late fall. The season usually began in February and finished in November; however, bears frequently participated in Christmas and New Year caroling. The animals travelled in chains held

⁴⁵ I.-A. Candrea, *Dicționarul enciclopedic ilustrat*, “Cartea Românească”, Partea 1: T–Z, București 1931, p. 15.

⁴⁶ *Tanana*, <http://dexonline.ro/definitie/tanana> [access: 25.04.2014]. More on this topic: R. Garfias, *Dance among the Urban Gypsies of Romania*, “Yearbook for Traditional Music” 1984, 16, p. 90, <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~rgarfias/aris/bio-research/dance-urban-gypsies.pdf> [access: 10.01.2015].

⁴⁷ G. Potra, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

⁴⁸ G. Potra, *op.cit.*, p. 35; A. Năstase, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ W. Wilkinson Smyth, *Un an cu turcii sau schite de calatorie in dominioane europene si asiatice ale sultanului* [in:] *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, Serie nouă, Vol. VI: 1852–1856, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Gadulka – a bowed string instrument carved out of one piece of wood, equipped with thirteen strings: three melodic strings and ten resonating drone strings.

⁵¹ M. Poslușnicu, *Istoria muzicii la români: de la Renaștere până în epoca de consolidare a culturii artistice*, București 1928, p. 539.

by Gypsies or attached to caravans. During performances, they were secured with a chain or a special very thick rope. Around their neck, they often wore a leather collar with a thick leather leash fastened to it. The bear's head and mouth were secured with a special type of muzzle (bit), to which an iron chain was attached to control the animal. The chains were often immobilized with sticks to keep the animal at a distance or to control its movements during a performance⁵². The chains put over the bear's teeth and around its eyes were also to prevent accidents during performances⁵³.

Bear handlers did not wander together as an occupational group but separately, only with their families. Sometimes they formed duets; sometimes a group of Gypsy families travelled together with several bears. Every now and then, they were part of a larger *Lăutari* band consisting of even a dozen members. The arrival of such a group stirred quite a sensation for the locals. The musicians played many instruments, making a lot of noise and commotion to the general enjoyment of the people. The instruments included the accordion, tarabans (type of a percussive folk instrument), hammered dulcimer, clarinet, horseshoe-shaped drymba (jawharp), mandola, and, finally, the gardon – similar to the cello, but smaller and a bit wider, equipped with four strings tuned to the same pitch, which were rubbed or struck with a bow (all four at once). The gardon was hand-made by Gypsies and generally played by women⁵⁴. Another instrument characteristic of the Romanian lands was the hammered dulcimer – a stringed instrument from the zither family, still manufactured today by the Roma craftsmen in Transylvania⁵⁵. The *Lăutari* bands, which also included the *Ursari*, were often managed by a leader called *primash*, who was responsible for selecting musicians and choosing the repertoire⁵⁶. To the accompaniment of music, bears and often other animals too (monkeys, dogs, etc.) cavorted around, danced, sat down, gyrated, walked to the front and back, swaying to the sides, laid down on their backs, and turned over. The “line-up” of bear tricks included: “riding a hoe like a horse”, beating the paw against the ground, looking embarrassed “like a girl”, pawing women, wrestling with a bear handler or a non-Gypsy eager to test his/her strength, and chain crushing. What is more, many bear handlers taught their animals how to dance tango and waltz⁵⁷. The animals were often given commands with the use of words or sounds of musical in-

⁵² http://poverty.chinagate.cn/photo/2012-07/04/content_25808451.htm [access: 12.10.2015].

⁵³ There are pictures of bears in full gear portrayed on Romanian postcards dating back to the time when bear handlers and their animals came to the Romanian king in Sinaia to give a caroling show. See: SINAIA 1920, Tigani URSARI, Tziganes, Gypsies with Bears, Postcards, <http://www.delcampe.net/page/item/id,193990407,var,SINAIA-1920-Tigani-URSARI-Tziganes-Gypsies-with-Bears-unused-rare-postcard,language,E.html> [odczyt: 2.12.2015].

⁵⁴ A.G. Piotrowska, *Topos muzyki cygańskiej w kulturze europejskiej od końca XVIII wieku do początku XX wieku*, Kraków 2011, p. 47.

⁵⁵ Field research, Bucharest, 20 Oct 2014; interview with the Lautars from Bucharest. See also the examples from Bulgaria: C. Silverman, *Bulgarian Gypsies: Adaptation in a Socialist Context*, “Nomadic Peoples”, December 1996, issue 21/22, http://nomadicpeoples.info/pdf/NP_journal_back_issues/Bulgarian_Gypsies_C_Silverman.pdf [access: 12.10.2015]; M. Poslušnicu, *Istoria muziceii la români: De la Renaștere...*

⁵⁶ A.G. Piotrowska, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

⁵⁷ S. Čirković, *op.cit.*, p. 113–114.

struments. For performances, they were decorated with colored tissue paper or real flowers. After the show, Gypsies took off their hats and asked for donations. This last “routine” was often performed by bears themselves, taught to hold out their paws for money, food, or even alcoholic drinks.

The *Ursari* visited towns and cities, where they could expect a magnificent turnout and some considerable earnings. They did not miss the weekly fairs, where they enjoyed a variety of spectators and immense popularity. They presented their artistry at fairs and squares and in the streets, and in the 20th century they travelled from place to place by bus or even ... taxi. Whether it was a single family of bear handlers or a whole group of *Lăutari*, the dwellers of a place they visited were always awestruck. The performances were huge crowd-pleasers. Hence the popular saying in the Romanian culture: “the world flocks around him like around a bear” (Rom. *se ținea lumea după el ca după urs*), used when talking about a very popular person who has a lot of friends and an eventful social life. The contemporary Romanian culture still remembers the origins of this saying and the associated old customs:

“This saying dates back to the old times. Long time ago, when the *Ursari* arrived in the village or at the fair, people gathered everywhere and followed them, because Gypsy performances were extremely popular. Once they gathered in one place, others flocked around like crazy; the crowd was enormous, because everyone wanted to see the bear. It is from this bear-admiring crowd that the saying *the world flocks around him like around a bear* stems”⁵⁸.

To be continued...

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⁵⁸ Field research, interview, Bucharest, October 2014, a man aged 62 (interview materials are in the possession of the author of this article).

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